

“Reading” and “Writing” Design

—

*A cyclical cognitive process model
for developing Design Literacy abilities.*

Towards Contingency: How Design Literacy Empowers Pluralistic Worldviews and Enhances Transitional Design

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The word “literacy” has come to be used to describe a wide range of competencies, including *design literacy* – a term that, despite its presence in design discourse, is still characterised by a certain fuzziness. In this paper, we explore this highly discursive theoretical field in order to gain a more nuanced and expanded understanding of the topic. In doing so, we argue that these divergent positions are also due to the ambiguity of the term “design”.

We understand design as the perpetual de- and reconstruction of the world, as a way of worldmaking, both physically and conceptually. Thus, design literacy can be understood as a way to perceive traces of design and its processes, to perceive the world as contingent: a circular cognitive process of recognising that something – if not everything – in our cultural pluriverse is designed, understanding how it was designed and that it can potentially become the subject of design again and again. In our paper, we emphasise the contingency of design – and the ethical level that can arise from understanding the possibility of a *different* design.

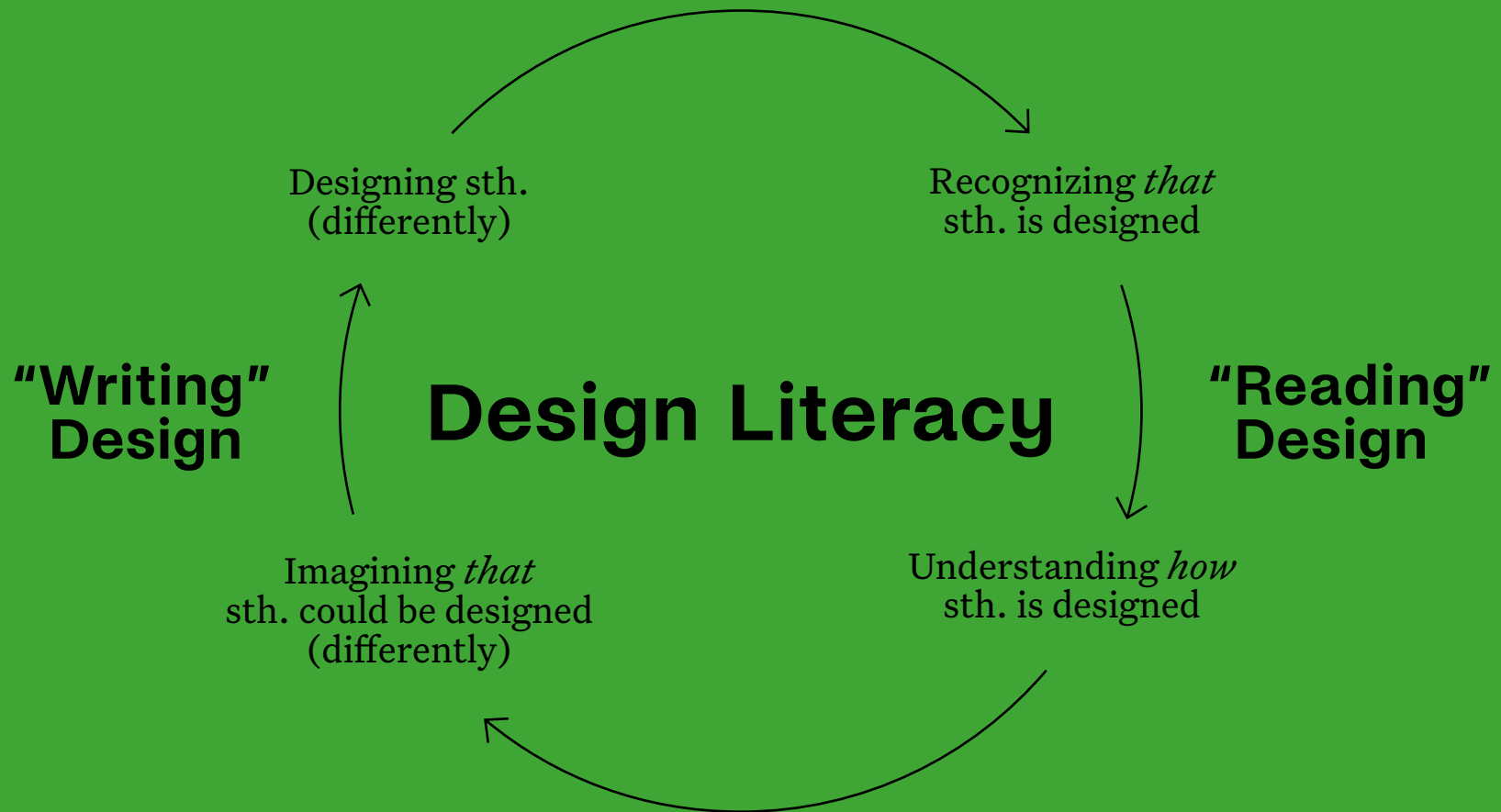
Ultimately, our aim with this paper is to emphasise that design literacy is a crucial competence for encouraging pluralistic perspectives and initiating transition processes, as it helps to acknowledge the temporary necessity but long-term non-necessity of things (which particularly includes the transitory nature of one’s own creations).

1 INTRODUCTION

Today, the word “literacy” does not refer solely to the ability to read and write. Instead, it has come to be used to describe a wide range of competencies – including design literacy. But what does it mean to be “design literate”? For some years now, a whole range of approaches have been gathered under the term “design literacy”, constituting anything but a uniform theoretical framework. Taking up, comparing and complementing these positions is not only relevant from a design theoretical point of view – and to enrich the discussion on design education – but also because it can be connected to current discussions on sustainability and ecological literacy (cf. Wahl 2005; Boehnert 2013; 2015; Micklethwaite 2022). The discourse on design literacy thus ties in with the discourse on political and social design (cf. Manzini 2015) as well as on pluriverse design (cf. Escobar 2018). In this paper, we will explore different approaches to design literacy by means of the method of discourse analysis (cf. Foucault 2020). The aim is not to arrive at a unifying theory but rather to map a highly discursive theoretical field in order to gain a differentiated and expanded understanding of the

topic, or as Burnett and Rowsell (2022, xxix) put it: “a key challenge for literacy studies is to multiply the stories we tell, but also to connect them”. Derived from this analysis, we will draw attention to a blind spot in the discussions around design literacy, which is that design always happens under certain conditions of *dependency*. We argue that in order to address the major socio-ecological challenges of our time, it is important to recognise the complex conditions under which things (in the broadest possible sense) are designed. Such an understanding has implications for the teaching and practice of design because it expands the comprehension of the process (to design) and the contingency of the outcome (Design). We argue that design literacy is a crucial competence for empowering pluralistic worldviews and initiating transition processes (Irwin 2015), as it helps to acknowledge the temporary necessity but long-term non-necessity of things – a realisation that may seem frightening for a designer but has an incredibly liberating effect.

The terms “design” and “literacy” can take on numerous meanings, and their collision is equally polysemantic. As designers, we associate “design” primarily with something *processual*, as in the process or the act of designing. We are well aware that in everyday language, the word is often used in the sense of a category for certain objects



*“a key challenge for literacy studies is
to multiply the stories we tell,
but also to connect them”*

“Reading” Design

George Nelson

**HOW
TO
SEE**

Visual Adventures
in a World
God Never Made



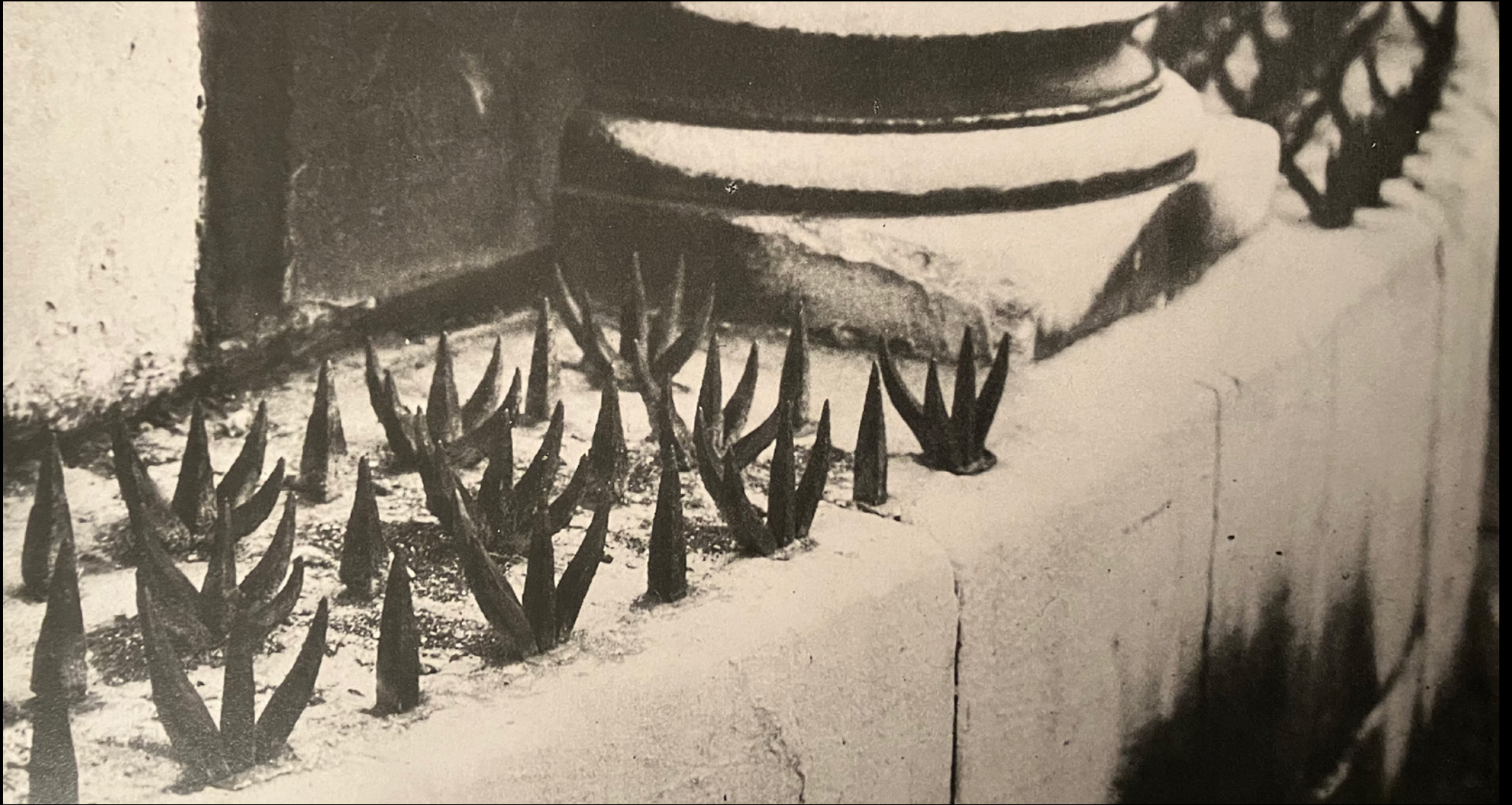
George Nelson's "How to See" (1977)

“if we really want to see the physical environment within which we spend most of our time, we do have to understand something about design and the design process”

(Nelson, Stein, and Bierut 2017, 19)



from George Nelson's "How to See"



from George Nelson's "How to See"



from **George Nelson's "How to See"**



from George Nelson's "How to See"



from George Nelson's "How to See"

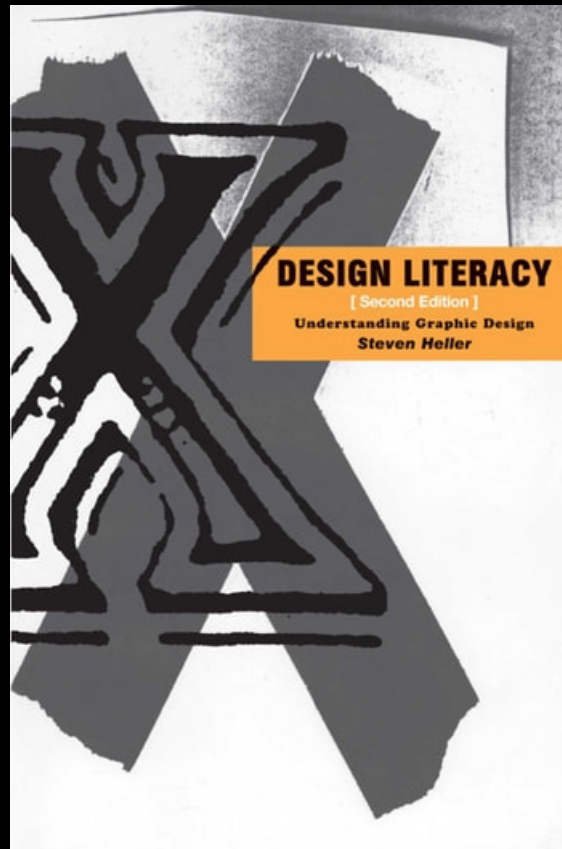


from George Nelson's "How to See"



Brandes and Erlhoff (2006)

“Almost every element in our environment shows evidence of man’s artifice”.



Steven Heller's "Design Literacy" (2nd ed.)

“The title Design Literacy refers to sharing common knowledge—certain facts, impressions, and opinions—about graphic design and its broader cultural affiliations, but this is not a textbook about how or what to make. By way of confession, the title more precisely reflects a personal journey.”

(Heller 2004, xiii)

“The human is permanently suspended between being the cause and the effect, between designing living systems and being designed by them. What is human in the end is neither the designer nor the artifacts but their interdependency.”

“Writing” Design

“The existence of any literacy, by definition, assumes there is a fundamental and agreed on set of skills that is taught, understood, and practiced by society at large. [...] without widespread agreement on what those skills are [...] technically, there can be no literacy.”

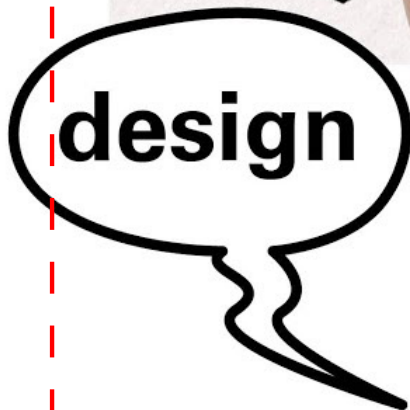
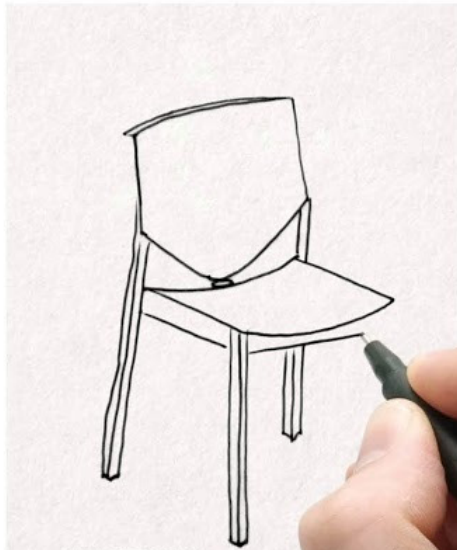
Abstraktum

Konkretum

process
method
prototyping
...

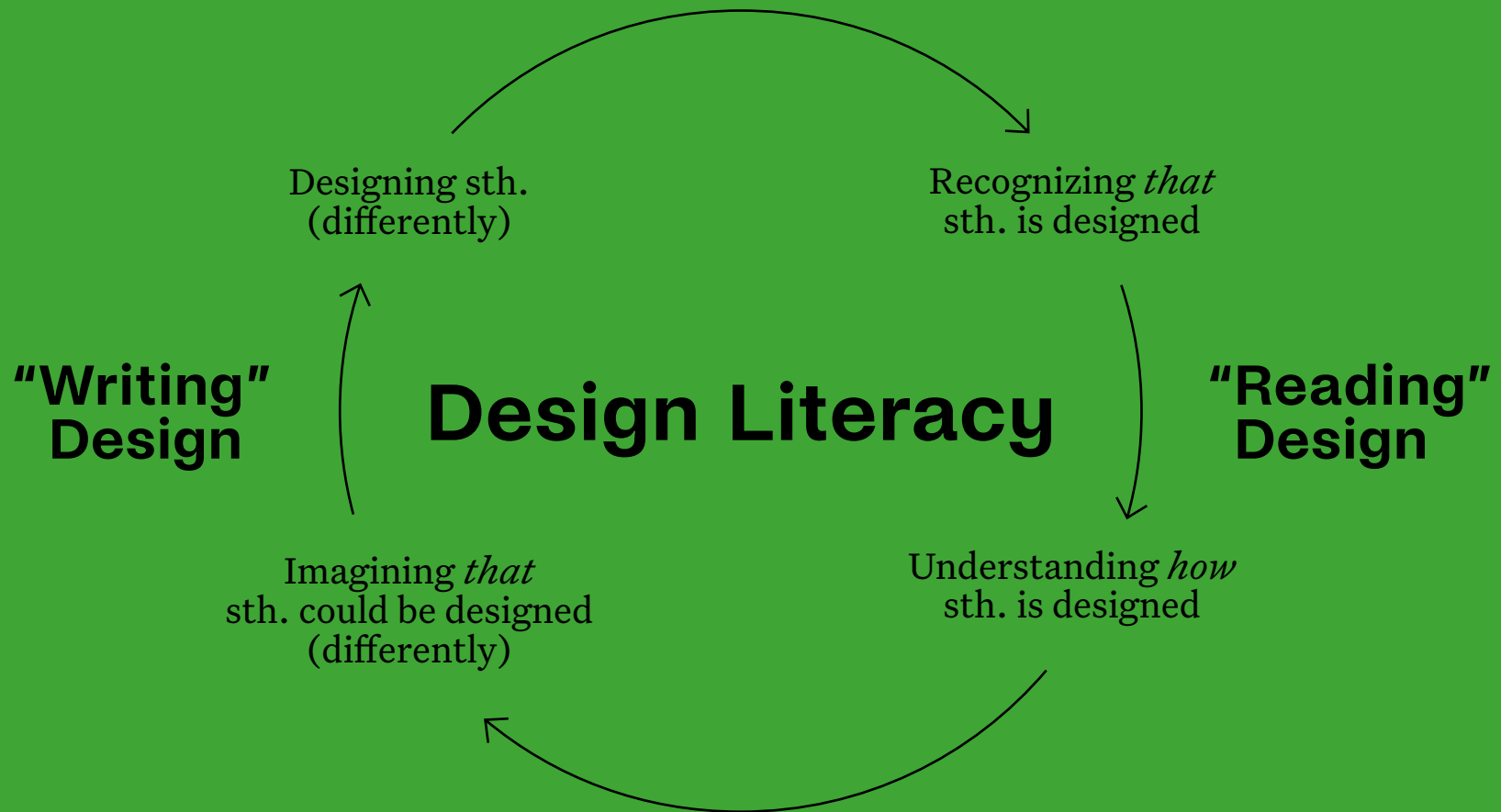
drawing
plan
instruction
...

artefact
appearance
surface
...



“Reading” and “Writing” Design

“Designers have the ability both to ‘read’ and ‘write’ in this [material] culture: they understand what messages objects communicate, and they can create new objects which embody new messages.”



“Being design literate in a context of critical innovation means to be aware of both positive and negative impacts of design on people and the planet, approaching real-world problems as complex, voicing change through design processes, and judging the viability of any design ideas in terms of how they support a transition towards more sustainable ways of living.”



“Any design that encourages appropriation and adaptation, that enables creative use, that considers its own transformation not as a failure but as a necessity, that takes into account its own transience and contingency, should be considered a design in the sense of sustainable development. We need design that empowers further design. And any action that helps to illuminate design processes, that helps reveal the complex and contradictory conditions under which design takes place, and that contributes to the perception of the world as designable and changeable, must also be understood as sustainable action.”

“In the famous Brundlandt Report sustainable development was defined as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ [...].

We would like to rephrase this to

‘The design of the present should not compromise the ability of future generations to design’.

The goal of design has to be design.”

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